

## "It" Follows

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# **"It" Follows**

by [Kiraly](#)

## Summary

Grandma Hotakainen always warned Onni not to let "It" find him. But he realizes too late that "It" already has.

Onni slumped against the wall of trees, forcing himself to take deep breaths. Safe, for now. Reynir might be able to break through all his barriers, but he couldn't walk through solid wood...yet. No telling what he might do next. There was a certain strength in anger though, and Onni held more of that than anyone he knew. When it wasn't leaking from his eyes—allergies, always allergies—it grew inside him, waiting. Sometimes, like now, he could use it. But it wore him out, being angry all the time. He couldn't even escape it in his sleep. There were so many things he couldn't escape.

He squeezed his eyes shut and rested his head on his knees. *Just go away*, he begged, letting the words rise from him like a prayer. He had lost so much already. Couldn't he catch a break, just this once?

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“There's no getting away from *It*,” Grandma said. She gave the word weight, so Onni understood the implied capital letter without having to ask. Ensi Hotakainen never said anything she did not mean. “It shows no mercy. It will never stop hunting for us.”

Onni pulled his cloak tighter around him. It didn't help. “But then...what are we supposed to *do*?” Grandma wouldn't be telling him this for no reason. She was fearless and strong in magic, everyone said so. If anyone had a solution for *It*, she would.

“There are ways to protect ourselves. I will teach you.” She sat straighter, and Onni tried to mirror her. “The most important thing to remember is this, though: Never let *It* touch you. If that happens, there's nothing more you can do. It will always be able to find you, living or dead.”

Her words hung over him like a shroud. Onni blinked, swallowed hard—he couldn't cry in front of Grandma, she didn't like that—and nodded. He would remember.

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The radio crackled, and a voice came through. Onni's heart leapt—even through the haze of grief, the sound caught him for a moment. But his hope faded when the person on the other end continued on in crisp Icelandic. Not word from the expedition, then. Not Lalli. Still, he couldn't help listening as Trond questioned the caller.

“What's so important that you had to call here? This is supposed to be a private frequency.”

The woman on the other end ignored his rude tone. “I'm calling to follow up on a report the Icelandic Coast Guard received some weeks ago. Are you the ones in charge of a research expedition to the Silent World?”

“Hmph. Yes, that's us.”

“In this report, you said your crew received a supply drop from an Icelandic vessel. And that there was an...unexpected passenger. One Reynir Árnason.”

Onni grimaced. *There* was a name he never wanted to hear again.

“Right. Some sheep farmer, I’m told. Why are you asking this? I thought everything was arranged. Your people are meeting ours at the pickup spot and telling the bumpkin’s family where he is. Our people just have to keep him alive.”

There was a long silence.

“Right. About contacting the family. There’s been a...complication.”

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Reynir wandered aimlessly across the dream sea. He wasn’t sure what to do with himself now. Everything he tried fell to pieces like badly spun wool. Lalli was missing. Onni refused to see him. Even the Pastor lady was nowhere to be found. He was trapped in the Silent World, pursued by ghosts with no way out. The ghost horse had said it would follow him forever, and he believed it.

He needed a plan. A way to get rid of the haunted hunters, or, if nothing else, a way to put as much distance between them as he could. Not for the first time, Reynir missed his life on the farm. It had been boring, sure. But it had been safe. He’d never dreamed, and therefore never had to worry about why a certain Finnish mage was so determined to shut him out of his dream space.

Reynir was so busy thinking about all of this that his toe struck wood before he realized where he was. His feet had carried him back to the first place he’d ever dreamed of: the old boat with the lantern. His touch set it rocking, ripples cascading out across the dark water. Reynir caught the side and held it steady.

Something about this place felt...important. He didn’t need his fylgja to tell him so. But he wasn’t sure he wanted to know what would happen if he got in. Would the boat take him somewhere? Would he fall asleep and wake to find he’d never left home at all? A memory tugged at the edge of awareness, but grasping for it only sent it drifting further away.

With a sigh, Reynir braced his hands on opposite sides and prepared to step into the boat.

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Onni had asked once, when Grandma was in a talkative mood, what *It* looked like. Her mouth twisted and she kept silent for so long that he thought she might never speak again. But at long last, she said, “It doesn’t look like any one thing. You’ll see something different from what I see, if you’re ever unlucky enough to meet It.”

Another time, he’d found an old photograph of Grandma in her younger days, looking almost happy with another woman’s arm wrapped around her. When he brought it to her, she stiffened and snatched it away. “I can’t bear to look at this,” she said. “Why would you bring it up? Leave the past buried. I ought to throw this on the fire.” But instead she tucked the photo inside her coat and went out to look for trolls.

Later, she gave him another lecture about It. “It will try to trick you. It can see into your head—let It get close, and your secrets aren’t safe. It will take on a form you won’t find dangerous. Usually, it borrows the face of someone you love.”

Onni remembered the woman from the photograph and thought he understood what she meant. He kept that thought to himself.

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The woman on the radio cleared her throat.

“It’s just...we found his family. Parents on a farm in the middle of nowhere, siblings scattered around the military. We talked to them and the story mostly matches up.”

“Mostly?”

“He did run away from home. Twenty years old, on his own for the first time. Said he was going to see the world.”

“And?”

“And...he did. Got a job onboard a trading vessel. Stowed away in a tuna crate when he heard they wouldn’t be letting anyone ashore in Denmark.”

Trond rolled his eyes. “We know all this. What’s your point?”

A long sigh. “Well, this is the difficult bit. All of this happened eleven years ago.”

“What?”

Trond’s shout brought the rest of the household running. In the ensuing babble, some of the details got lost. But Onni heard enough.

He knew what It looked like.

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Just as Reynir was about to heave himself into the boat, a voice called from across the water.

“Wait!”

Reynir turned, and there was Onni. He was in a terrible state, eyes wide and hair standing up in all directions. He stood close enough to talk, but too far away to touch.

“I know who you are,” Onni said.

Reynir blinked. “But I told you who I am.”

“No.” Onni shook his head and stepped forward, then jumped back as though his feet had betrayed him. “You told me who you *think* you are. But you’re wrong.”

“How could I be wrong about that?” It didn’t make sense. He remembered everything about his life back home: the sheep, his family, the conversation with Bjarni that had set him on this adventure. “I stowed away in a tuna crate and ended up in the Silent World on accident. What other truth is there?”

“You did stow away.” Onni let all his breath out in a whoosh. “But your crate never got unloaded. It was a mixup at the dock. They turned around and sailed back for Iceland. They thought you’d jumped ship.”

“But that’s not what—” He remembered the crate. It had smelled like tuna even through the cans, and it had been so dark before Emil opened it and—

“They found you too late. Suffocation, they said. Too many crates packed around yours for any air to get in.”

“No, that’s impossible!” The rush of air and light as Emil...as Emil opened...there had definitely been light. He remembered it.

“They couldn’t take you home for burial. Unsanitary, to have a body on board.” Onni’s voice had gone gentle. “They gave you a viking funeral, though. Put you on one of the ship’s boats and gave you to the sea.”

“No...”

“It was a comfort to your parents.”

Reynir gripped the side of the boat hard as the memories hit him. It shuddered and swayed under his weight. The whole world was shaking. “But I can’t be...dead. I’ve been on the mission. With Sigrun and Mikkell and Emil and Lalli and—” he couldn’t bring herself to say her name, not to Onni.

Onni’s eyes flashed. He’d heard anyway. “Ghosts like to repeat themselves. They linger in places, or haunt people. Sometimes they go through the motions of the end of their life—like stowing away in a tuna crate, for instance. Just waiting for someone to open it and find them.”

*Oh.*

“And I’m told,” Onni said, “that in Iceland, sometimes ghosts take physical form. They can walk among people. Touch them.” He folded his arms. “Hurt them, even.”

“But I would never hurt anyone!” That, at least, he was still sure of.

“Maybe not on purpose. You still think you’re a shepherd who wandered away from home.”

Something about Onni’s words sent a chill through him. “And you’re saying...I’m not?”

“No. You’re only borrowing him. You found his spirit wandering and lost eleven years ago. After you threw away your last form.” Onni stood straighter. “The one that lured my grandmother to her death.”

“Then who...am I?” He didn’t feel like some murdering creature. He felt like Reynir. Mostly. He still had the braid, anyway.

“You’re the spirit who’s haunting my family. You won’t rest until you’ve caught us all.”

That almost made sense. He did feel restless when it came to the Hotakainens. He'd thought there was another reason for it.

"And why are you here? If you think I'm going to catch you, shouldn't you stay far away?" Even as he said the words, his whole being rebelled at the idea. Onni shouldn't go. He should stay here. Come closer, even. Let Reynir hold him tight forever.

By some miracle, Onni did step closer. "It's too late for me. I've already let you touch me." He grimaced. "Or really, I touched you. It was the first thing I did when we met." A sigh, long and low. "Grandma must be so disappointed in me. After all those warnings." He shook his head. "Anyway, there's no getting away from you now. Not for Tuuri or Lalli, either. You've touched us all, which means you can find us, living or dead."

And that...felt true. He'd always known just how to find Onni's dream space, and Lalli's. Tuuri hadn't been a mage, but he'd always known where she was around the tank. And now

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"So...why are you telling me this? What do you want?" It didn't matter what the answer was, as long as they'd be together. And the way Onni was talking, it sounded like they would be.

Onni took another step and rested his hand on Reynir's boat. "I want you to take me to her. To Tuuri." Their eyes met, and for the first time Onni looked almost...hopeful. "Living or dead, you can find us. Isn't that right?"

Reynir nodded. Now that he was thinking about it, he knew how to get to Tuuri. It started with the boat.

Onni smiled, a bitter expression with too many sharp edges. He offered his hand. "Right. Then that's what I want. Take me to see my sister one last time, and then...well, you can do whatever it is that you do with Hotakainen mages."

Reynir still didn't know what that was. His own smile felt feeble, almost like it belonged to someone else. Maybe it did. But he still stuck out his hand and clasped Onni's in a firm handshake. "It's a deal."

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